Modern Masks

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

December 13, 1984–February 7, 1985

Modern Masks

Masks carry a weighty load of historical, cultural, mythological, psychological, and aesthetic references. They have been used as totems and toys, ritual objects and exaggerated portraits. Only in our own time have they gained status as art objects. The majority of works assembled in "Modern Masks" consciously refer to primitive design, an allusion that has been commonplace since early twentieth-century artists began to appreciate the abstract qualities of tribal cultural artifacts. In the late 1950s and early 1960s artists began creating masks in response to a surge of neo-primitivism in non-traditional art forms. In either the materials used—fur, rope, bark, wood, leather, clay, and stone—or in their specific format, these masks express a metaphoric link with the atavistic values which remain part of our consciousness in the late twentieth century.

Robert Brady's ceramic sculptures draw a specific parallel between modern masks and their ethnographic predecessors. The works in his Benicia series bear an uncanny likeness to the form of an East Greenland mask made in 1934. His more obviously primitive *Circle Mask* and *Untitled* (1982) are directly influenced by the elliptical shapes and black-and-white surface decoration common to other tribal pieces. By contrast, Daisy Youngblood's work demonstrates an affinity with prehistoric art in its media—unglazed clay, human hair, sticks, and other natural materials. Like primitive masks, her works have the power to command a space larger than their actual scale would suggest, perhaps because they evoke fetishistic objects more than the real people whose portraits they ostensibly present.

Similarly, David Finn's *Masked Figure (G.E. Bird)* recalls the fetishes of African tribal cultures. It is a work constructed like a voodoo doll, from rags, sticks, and articles of clothing found on the streets of New York. One of a series of life-size figures, Finn's bird-man approaches the image of the tribal icon with a playful urbanity. The featureless heads in Terry Rosenberg's cowhide masks are reminiscent of straw Shetland Islands mumming costumes of the 1880s which, according to a contemporaneous description, "stood like so many statues. . . . Eyes, mouth, or noses they had none, nor the least trace of countenance."

Some artists combine primitive design elements with the playful attitude often found in masks created by children. While Rafael Ferrer's tin can and coconut bark masks employ materials associated with the folk art of his native Puerto Rico, they are embellished with circles and slits, the symbolic designation all children use to describe facial features. The cardboard form of Rodney Alan Greenblat's *Ancient Mask* is also constructed with purposeful naiveté—folded down the middle in the symmetrical style of its grade-school counterparts. At the same time, the wide-eyed animal head-piece, hieroglyphic design, and elongated nose refer directly to tribal works. Equally childlike in presentation and medium, Saul Steinberg's paper bag masks address issues of contemporary art and society. They are portraits. meant to be worn, which represent specific people (often including the artist himself) or contemporary stereotypes—the wide-eyed "voodoo woman" or the stiff bureaucratic military officer.

Since masks have no religious or fetishistic function in modern life, contemporary masks lack the primitive power to terrify. Their static presence in the gallery defines them as sculpture with an aesthetic power rather than a ritualistic one. Yet they remain totemic mirrors—modern objects whose forms reflect our ancient past and comment on our present.

SUSAN LUBOWSKY

Checklist

Dimensions are in inches and in the case of irregular forms are approximate; height precedes width precedes depth.

Robert Arneson (b. 1930)

Alfred, 1981
Glazed ceramic, 14¾ x 10¾ x 5¾
The Saxe Collection

Mr. Hyde, 1981
Glazed ceramic, 13½ x 11 x 4½
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Andrew M. Lewis

Raw Bacon, 1981
Glazed ceramic, 15¼ x 10 x 6
Collection of Saralee and Robert Fine

Ges-Hu, 1982
Glazed ceramic, 18 x 16 x 8
Collection of Laila and Thurston Twigg-Smith

Pollock, 1983
Glazed ceramic, 15½ x 11 x 8½
Allan Frumkin Gallery, New York

Robert Brady (b. 1946)

Alto Mask, 1980
Glazed ceramic, 13 x 12 x 5½
Collection of Daniel Jacobs

Rage, 1981
Glazed ceramic, 24 x 16 x 18
Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco

LEFT
Robert Brady
Alto Mask, 1980
Glazed ceramic, 13 x 12 x 5½ inches
Collection of Daniel Jacobs
Photograph by Malcolm Varon, New York © 1983

Untitled, 1981
Glazed ceramic, 14½ x 8 x 6
Collection of Daniel Jacobs

Circle Mask, 1982
Glazed ceramic, 20 x 10 x 12
Collection of Robert J. Warrens

Untitled, 1982
Glazed ceramic, 25 x 8 x 11¾
Collection of Daniel Jacobs

Benicia Series Mask #10, 1983
Glazed ceramic, 18 x 12 x 7
Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco

Benicia Series Mask #11, 1984
Glazed ceramic, 23 x 15 x 8
Braunstein Gallery, San Francisco

Roger Brown (b. 1941)

Mask for the Chairman of the Board of Directors, 1974
Acrylic on wood and mixed media, 37 x 9 x14
Collection of George Veronda

Craig Coleman (b. 1961)

Delirium, 1984
Enamel on metal and wood, 64 x 32 x 16
Collection of Marsha Fogel

Hallucination, 1984
Enamel on metal and wood, 72 x 34 x 22
Gracie Mansion Gallery and New Math Gallery, New York

Rafael Ferrer (b. 1933)

Face, 1980–81
Paint on coconut bark, 44 x 10
Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York

Face, 1980–81
Paint on coconut bark, 29½ x 9¼
Nancy Hoffman Gallery, NewYork

Untitled, 1981
Paint on metal, 15 x 16
Nancy Hoffman Gallery, New York

David Finn (b. 1952)

Masked Figure (G.E. Bird), 1984
Acrylic on cardboard and refuse materials, 54 x 32 x 24
Salvatore Ala Gallery, New York

Nancy Graves (b. 1940)

Untitled, 1981
Shells, wire, and aluminum, 27 x 34 x 5½
Collection of Madeleine and Jay Bennett

Rodney Alan Greenblat (b. 1960)

Ancient Mask, 1984
Acrylic on museum board, 13 x 10 x 3
Collection of Bodi

Nancy Grossman (b. 1940)

Head, 1968
Epoxy, leather, and wood, 16¼ x 6¼ x 8½
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation, Inc. 68.81

Cob II, 1980
Wood, leather, horn, and lead, 33 x 9 x 12
Collection of Barbara and Eugene Schwartz

Ninja, 1980
Carved wood, pigskin, zippers, and cast aluminum, 16 x 10 x 11 (including base)
Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York

Marisol (b. 1930)

Sun Mask, 1980
Cast bronze, 13 x 11 x 3
Sidney Janis Gallery, New York

Terry Rosenberg (b. 1954)

Untitled, 1979
Cowhide, 34 x 19 x 22
Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1979
Cowhide, 39 x 21 x 24
Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1979
Cowhide, 36 x 19 x 22
Bette Stoler Gallery, New York

Susan Rothenberg (b. 1945)

Untitled, 1981
Brass and copper wire, 9 x 6 x 3
Collection of Madeleine and Jay Bennett

Joseph Schactman (b. 1957)

Untitled, 1983
Wood, linoleum, fur, asphalt, metal, and latex, 15 x 6 x 19
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1983
Wood, fur, and lead, 25 x 10 x 12
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1984
Resin, fur, shoelace, and latex, 10 x 9 x 15
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1984
Cardboard, fur, rubber, and chain, 8 x 12 x 25
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1984
Resin, fur, rope, and paper, 10 x 9 x12
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

Ursula Schneider (b. 1943)

Mask E, 1976
Hair and thread, 17 x 14 x 4
Collection of the artist

Mask Y, 1976
Hair, thread, and lacquer, 13 x 12 x 5
Collection of the artist

The Hat for the Chimney Sweeper, 1983
Hair, 14 x 12 x 12
Private collection

Robert Sherman (b. 1945)

Red Demon with Green, 1979
Raku (Japanese fired clay), 9½ x 8 x 3
Collection of the artist

Under the Sea, 1979
Raku (Japanese fired clay), 12 x 9 x 5
Collection of the artist

Kiki Smith (b. 1954) and David Wojnarowicz (b. 1954)

Untitled, 1984
Mixed media, 18 x 12 x 36
Civilian Warfare Gallery, New York

Saul Steinberg (b. 1914)

Untitled, 1958
Mixed media on wood and paper bag, 17¼ x 7½ x 4½
The Pace Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1961
Mixed media on wood and paper bag, 74 x 19½ x 7½
The Pace Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1961
Mixed media on wood and paper bag, 18 x 9¾ x 5¾
The Pace Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1961
Mixed media on wood and paper bag, 17½ x 12¾ x 5¼
The Pace Gallery, New York

Untitled, 1968
Mixed media on wood and paper bag, 13 x 9¾ x 5¾
The Pace Gallery, New York

Jeff Way (b. 1942)

Two-Horn Mask, 1983
Oil on plaster, 22 x 9 x 3½
Collection of the artist

Owl Mask, 1984
Oil on turtle shell, 12 x 10 x 3½
Collection of the artist

Karl Wirsum (b. 1939)

Skull Mask I (Sid), 1975
Acrylic on papier-mâché, 11 x 9 x 1½
Collection of Robert A. Lewis

Skull Mask III (Saul), 1975
Acrylic on papier-mâché, 11 x 8 x 1½
Collection of Gladys Nilsson

Skull Mask IV (Sam), 1975
Acrylic on papier-mâché, 11 x 8 x 1½
Collection of Marina Kellen-Gundlach

Daisy Youngblood (b. 1945)

Black Horse, 1979
Unglazed ceramic, 8 x 6 x 14
Private collection

Goat/Heart Spouting Blood, 1979
Unglazed ceramic, 22 x 19 x 13
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Comfort, courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Cheetah Head, 1980
Unglazed ceramic, 7¾ x 12½ x 10¾
Collection of Sydney and Frances Lewis

Sylvia, 1980
Unglazed ceramic, 8½ x 5¾ x 7½
Collection of Marsha Fogel

Male Gorilla, 1981
Unglazed ceramic and stone, 11½ x 11 x 13
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Carl D. Lobell

Portrait of the Artist's Mother, 1982
Unglazed ceramic and moss, 4½ x 8 x 7½
Collection of Ursula Kalish, courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

Watching Girl, 1983
Unglazed ceramic, sticks, and hair, 17 x 15 x 15¼
Collection of Margot Gordon, courtesy Barbara Gladstone Gallery, New York

The works in this exhibition were selected by Susan Lubowsky, Branch Director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris. Special thanks are extended to Patterson Sims, Associate Curator, Permanent Collection, for his valuable advice and to intern Suzanne Shepard, who helped with the research for this publication.

Funding for the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris is provided by Philip Morris Incorporated.

Free Performance Series

Joan Jonas
Friday, December 14, 1984, at 7:30 pm

Theodora Skipitares in collaboration with Virgil Moorefield
Tuesday, December 18, 1984, at 7:30 pm

Jeff Way
Thursday, January 10, 1985, at 7:30 pm

Robert Sherman
A special performance for children of an Innuit Eskimo legend.
Monday, January 28, 1985, at 11:00 am
Reservations required for school groups (212) 878-2453

Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris
120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Gallery Hours
Monday–Saturday 11:00 am–6:00 pm
Thursday until 7:30 pm

Sculpture Court Hours
Monday–Saturday 7:30 am–9:30 pm
Sunday 11:00 am–7:00 pm
Free admission

Gallery Talks
Monday, Wednesday, Friday at 12:30 pm
Tours by appointment
For information call (212) 878-2550

Staff
Lisa Phillips
Head, Branch Museums, and Associate Curator
Susan Lubowsky
Branch Director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris
Janis Krasnow
Acting Assistant Manager
Charlotte Meehan
Acting Gallery Assistant

Design
Elizabeth Finger
Typesetting
Haber Typographers, Inc.
Printing
Eastern Press, Inc.

© 1984 Whitney Museum of American Art